Chapter 34
IT'S COLD TO-NIGHT.
コト…
TNK
IN THE END ...
...THE SUIREI MATTER WAS HUSHED UP.
IN A STRANGE TURN OF EVENTS, THE COFFIN BEARERS WHO WERE MAKING DELIVERIES TO THE MORTUARY...
...CLAIMED TO HAVE RECEIVED NO SPECIAL REQUESTS.

Chapter 34 Gao Shun

SUIREI, THE COURT LADY HERSELF, WAS EQUALLY HARD TO GET A HANDLE ON.
IT'LL BE A WHILE BEFORE I GET TO THE BOTTOM OF THIS ONE.
THE MAN HAD TAKEN HER IN AS HIS ADOPTED DAUGHTER SOME YEARS AGO AFTER RECOG-NIZING HER TALENTS...
...BUT THEY DIDN'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT HER PRIOR LIFE.
THE PHYSI-CIAN WHO KNEW HER...
...TOLD US THAT HIS TEACHER HAD BEEN SUIREI'S GUARDIAN.
SIGH
IT'S JUST ONE HEADACHE AFTER ANOTHER THESE DAYS.
I'M NEARING MY WITS' END.
カチャン CLATTER
カチャン CLATTER

I'LL GO WITH YOU.
I HAVE A FEELING THAT GIRL WOULD FIND A WAY TO REOPEN HER WOUND IF LEFT TO HER OWN DEVICES...
I'VE SEEN XIAOMAO BACK HOME.
OH.
GOOD. SORRY FOR MAKING A HABIT OF PUTTING YOU OUT.
...SO EVER SINCE THE RITUAL ...
...GAO SHUN HAS BEEN ACTING AS HER ESCORT AT MY BEHEST.
BUT HER INJURY ISN'T THE ONLY THING THAT TROUBLES ME.
THERE'S ALSO THE MATTER OF THAT CRANK, LA KAN.
I'M FAIRLY CERTAIN HE'S HER FATHER BY BLOOD, BUT IF HER REACTION TO HIS NAME IS ANYTHING TO GO BY...
...THERE IS MORE TO THAT STORY, AND NOT ALL OF IT GOOD.

AND FROM WHAT I HEAR...
...HE WAS ALSO INVOLVED IN THE MESS AT THE RITUAL.
IT'S ALL BUT COMMON KNOWL-EDGE IN THE IMPERIAL COURT NOW...
...TO EXPECT THE UNEX-PECTED FROM THAT LOON.
AND THEN THERE'S GAO SHUN, WHO ALWAYS KEEPS HIS MOUTH SHUT AND GETS THE JOB DONE.
HE'S BEEN IN CHARGE OF MY EDUCATION ALMOST FROM THE VERY MINUTE I WAS WEANED.
FOR A TIME, WE WERE PARTED WHILE HE WENT OFF TO DO ANOTHER JOB...
...BUT WHILE HE MAY NOT HAVE ALWAYS BEEN AT MY SIDE, HE IS, WITHOUT A DOUBT, MY GREATEST ALLY.
HIS WIFE WAS MY WET NURSE TOO.
I'LL NEVER BE ABLE TO REPAY HIM FOR ALL HE'S DONE FOR ME.

WE'RE OFF TO THE INNER COURT IN THE MORNING, THEN?
カタ CLINK
とぽぽ GLUG GLUG GLUG
YES.
I DON'T DETECT ANY ISSUES.
IT TASTES ABOUT THE SAME AS USUAL.
IN OTHER WORDS, IT TASTES WEIRD.
ゴクッ GULP

WHEN TAKEN DAILY, IT PRODUCES A UNIQUE EFFECT.
THIS MEDICINE CONTAINS DISSOLVED POTATO FLOUR IMPORTED FROM ABROAD.
LI, GULP
HAAH...
I DON'T THINK I'LL EVER GET USED TO THE SICKLY SWEET TASTE OF THIS STUFF.
IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT, DON'T DRINK IT.
IT'S WHAT MAKES ME THE EUNUCH I AM... FOR NOW.
IF YOU WISH TO APPEAR MORE LIKE ONE...
...PERHAPS YOU OUGHT NOT TO PINCH YOUR NOSE IN FRONT OF OTHERS.
IT MAKES YOU SEEM LIKE A CHILD.
I KNOW.

TALL AND STATELY IN STATURE, REFINED IN DEMEANOR, WITH THE FACE OF A CELESTIAL MAIDEN AND A VOICE AS SWEET AS HONEY.
A 24-YEAR-OLD MAN IN POSSESSION OF THESE QUALITIES WHO BECAME A EUNUCH...
...WHEN THE CURRENT EMPEROR TOOK THE INNER COURT FOR HIS OWN FIVE YEARS AGO.
THAT'S "JINSHI."
I WAS GIVEN LEAVE BY HIS MAJESTY TO DO AS I LIKED AROUND THE LOWER-RANKING CONCUBINES AND THOSE BENEATH THEM, BUT...
SIX YEARS AGO, I DECIDED TO PUT ON THE MASK OF "JINSHI."
AND SO I'VE BEEN DRINKING THIS STUFF THAT MAKES ME LESS OF A MAN DAILY EVER SINCE.
BFFT!
KEEP THIS UP, AND IT WILL COMPLETELY CEASE TO WORK ONE OF THESE DAYS, YOU KNOW.

SO YOU'RE SAYING YOU HAVE NO NEED FOR FUTURE PROGENY?
MY GRAND-CHILD WAS BORN JUST THE OTHER DAY.
MY KIDS ARE ALL GROWN NOW.
HOW OLD ARE YOU, AGAIN?
COUGH
COUGH
SAME GOES FOR YOU!
SO WHICH ONE OF YOUR OLDER SONS MADE YOU A GRAND-PA?
MY ELDEST.
MY YOUNGEST NEEDS TO START LOOKING FOR A WIFE SOON.
I AM 37 YEARS NOW.
YOU WERE 15 WHEN YOU MARRIED, RIGHT?
YES.
WE HAD THREE CHILDREN, ONE AFTER THE OTHER, STARTING THE FOLLOWING YEAR.

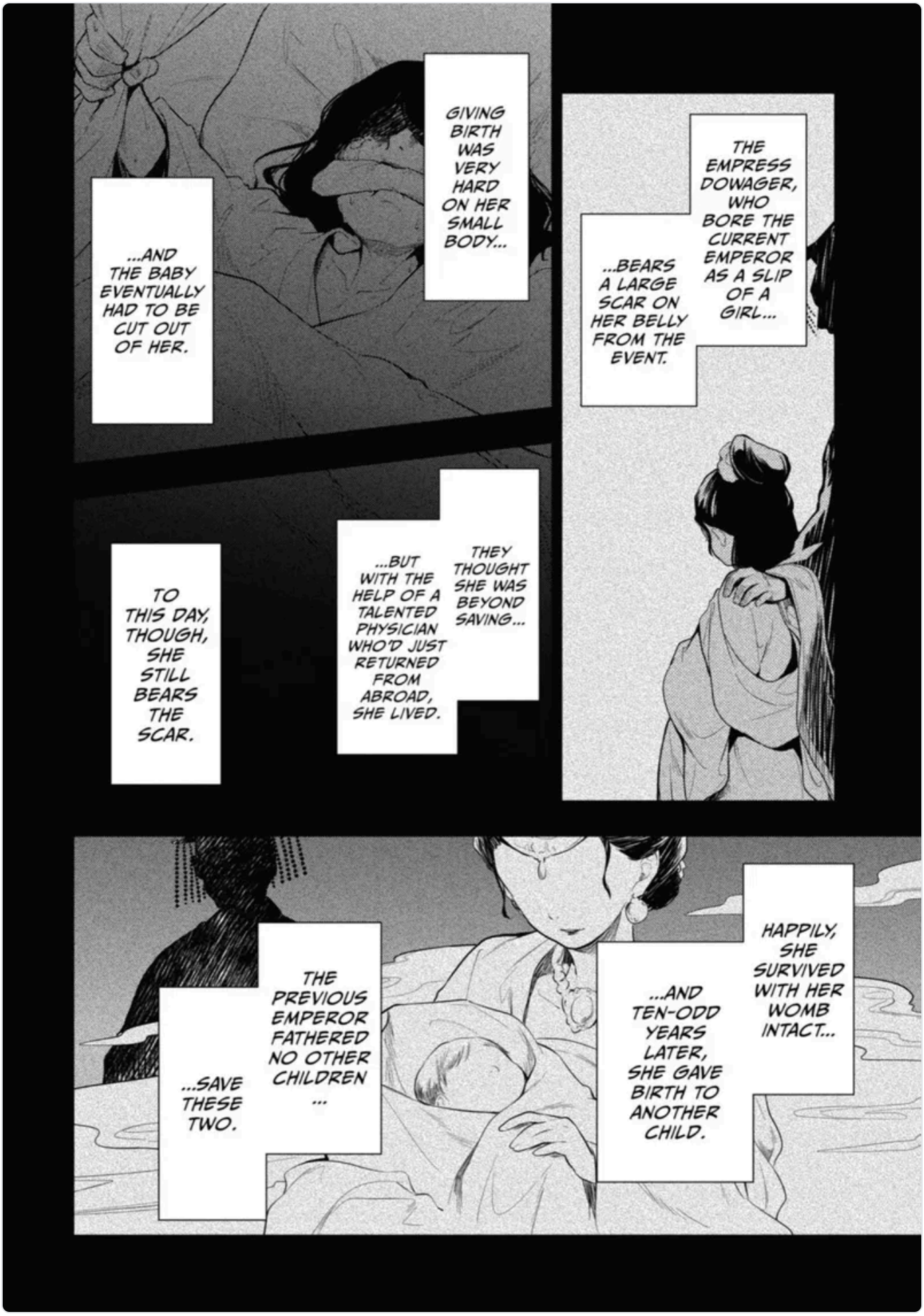
WE'RE TALKING ABOUT BA SEN, AREN'T WE?
HE'S ONLY 19!
THAT'S RIGHT.
JERK
HE IS THE SAME AGE AS YOU, YOUR HIGH-NESS.
51

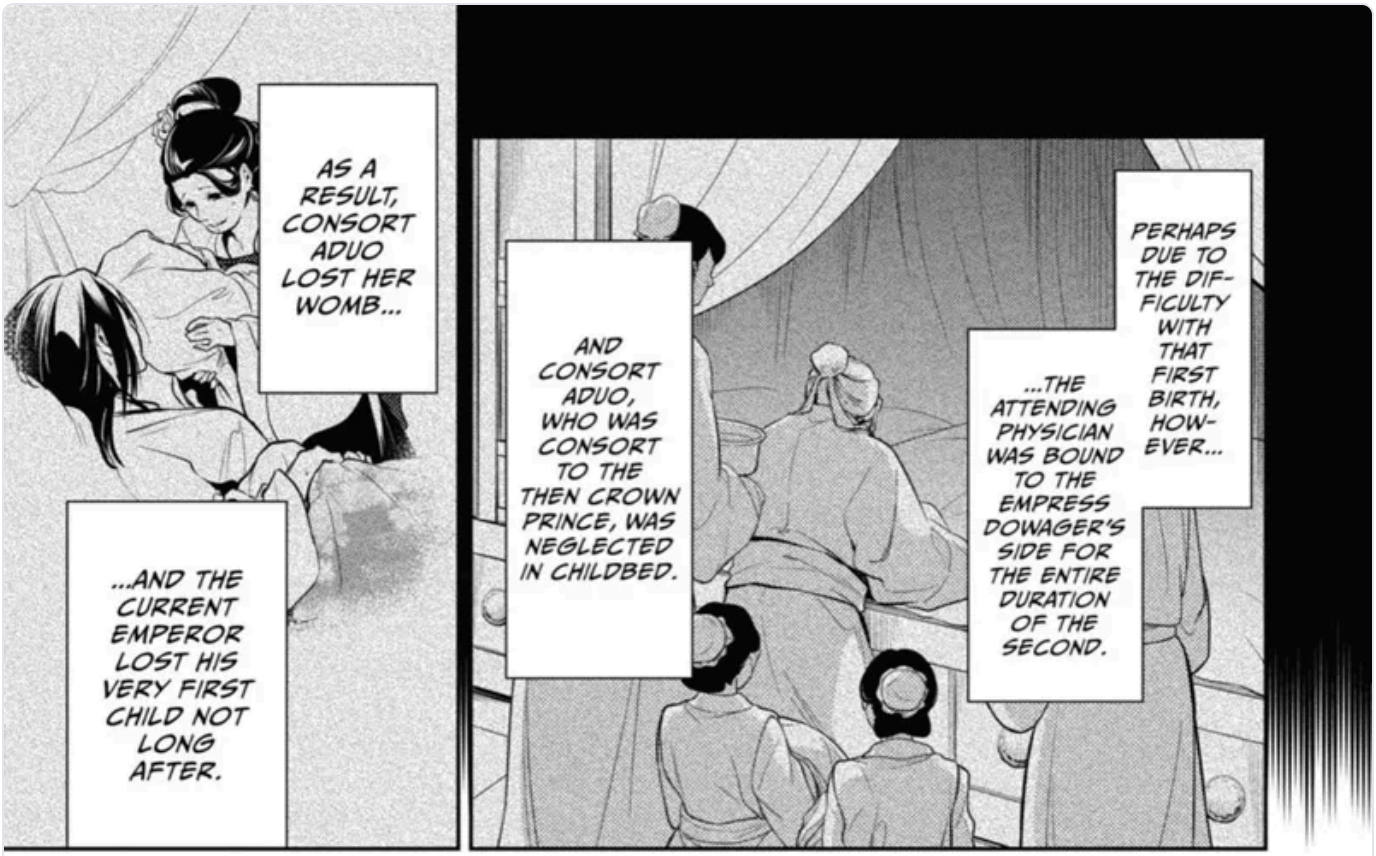
PLEASE. I WANT TO HOLD MY GRANDCHILD AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.
HMPH!
...AND BE DONE WITH THIS JOB.
YOUR FACE SEEMS TO BE TELLING ME TO TAKE A MISTRESS OR THREE...
I'LL TRY TO MAKE IT HAPPEN.

...NOW DAZZLES WITH GAUDY GLAMOR.
THE REFRESHINGLY MINIMAL AND PRAGMATIC GARNET PALACE OF THE PAST...
IT HAS ONCE AGAIN ...
...BECOME A LONELY PLACE.
...APPEARS TO HAVE SETTLED IN WITHOUT ANY ISSUES.
THOUGH NEW TO THE INNER COURT, CONSORT LOULAN...
IN A SENSE, CONSORT LOULAN FORCED HER WAY IN HERE.
I WAS AFRAID THERE MIGHT BE SOME FRICTION GOING AROUND...
...BUT ALL SEEMS WELL THUS FAR.
IT WAS THANKS TO HIM THAT THE NUMBER OF WOMEN IN THE INNER COURT GREW TO AS MANY AS 3,000.
CONSORT LOULAN'S FATHER HAD THE PREVIOUS EMPRESS DOWAGER'S FAVOR.

...ALSO HAS THE ABILITY TO RUIN SAID BALANCE.
...AS A MEANS OF MAINTAINING THE BALANCE OF POWER IN THE PALACE, THE INNER COURT...
IN ITS FUNC-TION...
CONSORT LOULAN DOES SEEM TO BE QUITE FASHION-CONSCIOUS, THOUGH.
...CON-SORT GYOKU-YO...
AS IT CURRENTLY STANDS, THE EMPEROR'S FAVORITES IN ORDER ARE...
...THEN CONSORT LIHUA.
SHE HAS A NEW HAIRSTYLE AND MAKEUP EVERY TIME I SEE HER.
SHE WAS WEARING A NOVEL DRESS WITH SHOWY FEATHERS DURING THAT CLASS FOR THE COURTESANS TOO.
BUT THE EMPEROR HAS ALSO TAKEN CARE NOT TO OFFEND CONSORT LOULAN...
...AND CALLS ON HER ONCE EVERY TEN DAYS.

SHE'S ALSO WORN GARMENTS FROM THE SOUTHERN LANDS, AS WELL AS THE CLOTHING OF THE NORTHERN TRIBES.
SHE'S EVEN STEPPED OUT IN THE STYLE OF THE NOMADS, LIKE A BOY...
...AND SPORTED GARMENTS FROM THE WEST THAT CONSTRICT THE WAIST.
THE EMPEROR NEVER KNOWS WHO HE'S GOING TO GET EACH TIME HE CALLS ON CONSORT LOULAN...
...AND THAT HAS DAMPENED HIS DESIRE FOR HER.
?
THE GOSSIP HAS IT THAT SHE DRESSES IN SUCH OUTLANDISH WAYS BECAUSE OF HER PLAIN FACE...
...BUT I DON'T KNOW HOW MUCH TRUTH, IF ANY, THERE IS TO THAT.
AND WHILE WE'RE ON THE SUBJECT OF HIS IMPERIAL MAJESTY'S DISINTEREST, CONSORT LISHU IS IN THE SAME BOAT.
IN HER CASE ...
...IT'S BECAUSE THE CURRENT EMPEROR, UNLIKE HIS FATHER, TAKES EXCEPTION TO BEDDING YOUNG GIRLS.


GIVING BIRTH WAS VERY HARD ON HER SMALL BODY...
...AND THE BABY EVENTUALLY HAD TO BE CUT OUT OF HER.
THE EMPRESS DOWAGER, WHO BORE THE CURRENT EMPEROR AS A SLIP OF A GIRL...
...BEARS A LARGE SCAR ON HER BELLY FROM THE EVENT.
THEY THOUGHT SHE WAS BEYOND SAVING...
...BUT WITH THE HELP OF A TALENTED PHYSICIAN WHO'D JUST RETURNED FROM ABROAD, SHE LIVED.
TO THIS DAY, THOUGH, SHE STILL BEARS THE SCAR.
HAPPILY, SHE SURVIVED WITH HER WOMB INTACT...
...AND TEN-ODD YEARS LATER, SHE GAVE BIRTH TO ANOTHER CHILD.
THE PREVIOUS EMPEROR FATHERED NO OTHER CHILDREN ...
...SAVE THESE TWO.


AS A RESULT, CONSORT ADUO LOST HER WOMB...
...AND THE CURRENT EMPEROR LOST HIS VERY FIRST CHILD NOT LONG AFTER.
AND CONSORT ADUO, WHO WAS CONSORT TO THE THEN CROWN PRINCE, WAS NEGLECTED IN CHILDBED.
...THE ATTENDING PHYSICIAN WAS BOUND TO THE EMPRESS DOWAGER'S SIDE FOR THE ENTIRE DURATION OF THE SECOND.
PERHAPS DUE TO THE DIFFICULTY WITH THAT FIRST BIRTH, HOWEVER...

IF HIS SON WERE STILL ALIVE NOW, THEN...
WHAT POINT IS THERE IN DREAMING UP SILLY WHAT-IFS?
HMPH.

HE SHOULD SIMPLY FATHER A NEW CROWN PRINCE ALREADY.
...THE EMPEROR BEGAN CALLING ON HIS CONSORTS MUCH MORE OFTEN.
AFTER THE CLOSED SESSION FOR THE COURTE-SANS...
PERHAPS WE'LL SEE RESULTS SOONER THAN WE EXPECT.

I HEAR THE EMPEROR ONCE AGAIN VISITED THE JADE PALACE YESTER-DAY...
DO PARDON THE INTRU-SION.
PLEASE COME IN.
MY APOLO-GIES FOR THE WAIT.
YEAH, SURE.
FINALLY HERE, HUH?

パタン
SHUT
YOU SEEM QUITE TIRED, MY LADY.
ARE YOU FEELING ILL?
...WELL, AS IT HAPPENS ...

WIPE
ふき
WIPE
ふき
YOU'D LIKE ME TO RETURN TO THE INNER COURT?
MM.
YOU CAN HAVE YOUR BELOVED JOB BACK.
!!
IT SEEMS CONSORT GYOKUYO'S LUNAR CYCLE HAS STOPPED.

WHEN SHE WAS PREGNANT WITH THE PRINCESS, SOMEONE TRIED TWICE TO POISON HER.
THE PERSON BEHIND IT STILL HASN'T BEEN FOUND.
NO SURPRISE, THEN, THAT EVERYONE IS ANXIOUS THIS TIME AROUND.
THE "LUNAR CYCLE" IS ONE WAY OF TALKING ABOUT A WOMAN'S MENSES.
IF IT'S STOPPED ...
...SHE MAY WELL BE WITH CHILD.

WHEN DO I START?

62

AS YOU WISH.
HOW ABOUT TODAY?
MEN ARE FORBID-DEN TO ENTER...
...SO I WON'T HAVE TO WORRY...
..ABOUT RUNNING INTO YOU-KNOW-WHO.
GOING TO THE INNER COURT ACTUALLY WORKS OUT WELL FOR ME.
...THIS IS JINSHI BEING NICE TO ME?
MAYBE ...

WELL, I DON'T MIND EITHER WAY.
OR MAYBE IT'S JUST CONVE-NIENT.
I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU MEAN.
HUH ?!
YOU SEEM TO BE IN A CHEERFUL MOOD.
MY, MY.
DO A THOROUGH JOB WITH THE REST OF THOSE DISHES, OKAY?
...YES, MA'AM.
I THOUGHT I'D FINALLY FOUND A GIRL WORTH TRAINING, AND NOW I'M GOING TO LOSE HER.
TEE-HEE! WHAT A SHAME.